Information Warfare: Russian Operatives and Bots Sowing U.S. Discord By Infiltrating Online Conversations

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13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign

By **MATT APUZZO** and **SHARON LaFRANIERE**   FEB. 16, 2018

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department charged 13 Russians and three companies on Friday in a sprawling indictment that unveiled a sophisticated network designed to subvert the 2016 election and to support the Trump campaign. It stretched from an office in St. Petersburg, Russia, into the social feeds of Americans and ultimately reached the streets of election battleground states.

"The indictment alleges that the Russian conspirators want to promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy," Rod J. Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general overseeing the inquiry, said in a brief news conference. "We must not allow them to succeed."

Working out of the office in St. Petersburg, the Russians described waging "information warfare against the United States of America," according to court documents.

Source: Matt Apuzzo & Sharon LaFraniere. Feb. 16, 2018. "13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign," *The New York Times.*

Russian computer specialists, divided into day teams and night teams, created hundreds of social media accounts that eventually attracted hundreds of thousands of online followers.

Source: Matt Apuzzo & Sharon LaFraniere. Feb. 16, 2018. "13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign," *The New York Times.*

Even after the election, the Russians kept up their efforts to foment dissent.

In November, they staged two rallies in New York on the same day. One had the theme, "Show your support for President-Elect Trump."

The other was called, "Trump is NOT my President."

Source: Matt Apuzzo & Sharon LaFraniere. Feb. 16, 2018. "13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign," *The New York Times.*

Fraudulent Social Media Accounts

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In an email written to a family member, a Russian defendant, Irina Viktorovna Kaverzina, said: "I created all these pictures and posts, and the Americans believed that it was written by their people."

Source: Alicia Parlapiano and Jasmine C. Lee. Feb. 16, 2018. "The Propaganda Tools Used by Russians to Influence the 2016 Election," *The New York Times*.

Political Rallies

Russian organizations staged several political rallies across the country from June to November 2016.

Source: Alicia Parlapiano and Jasmine C. Lee. Feb. 16, 2018. "The Propaganda Tools Used by Russians to Influence the 2016 Election," *The New York Times*.

Political Rallies

These operatives would use false U.S. personas to recruit rally attendees.

Sometimes, Trump campaign staff members unwittingly helped, including providing signs for the rallies.

Source: Alicia Parlapiano and Jasmine C. Lee. Feb. 16, 2018. "The Propaganda Tools Used by Russians to Influence the 2016 Election," *The New York Times*.

Political Rallies

Groups also purchased advertisements to promote the rallies. Facebook ads for the Florida rallies reached more than 59,000 users.

Multiple tweets from Florida rallies on Aug. 20, 2016 mentioned the group's March for Trump account.

Source: Alicia Parlapiano and Jasmine C. Lee. Feb. 16, 2018. "The Propaganda Tools Used by Russians to Influence the 2016 Election," *The New York Times.*

Online Political Advertisements

Adopting religious names and appealing to Christians, often around an anti-Muslim trope, ads like these were shared hundreds of thousands of times.

Source: Alicia Parlapiano and Jasmine C. Lee. Feb. 16, 2018. "The Propaganda Tools Used by Russians to Influence the 2016 Election," *The New York Times*.

Facebook disclosed that about 130 rallies were promoted by 13 of the Russian pages, which reached 126 million Americans with provocative content on race, guns, immigration and other volatile issues.

Source: Scott Shane. Feb. 18, 2018. "Hoe Unwitting Americans Encountered Russian Operatives Online," *The New York Times.*

About a dozen people protested against what they called the threat of radical Islam in Houston in May 2016. They were met by a much larger crowd of counter-protesters. Both sides were organized by Russian groups.

Credit Jon Shapley/*Houston Chronicle*

The Russian Twitter feed @TEN_GOP, which posed as a Tennessee Republican account, attracted more than 100,000 followers.

Messages from the group were retweeted by Donald Trump Jr.; Kellyanne Conway, the president's counselor; Michael T. Flynn, the former national security adviser; and his son, Michael Flynn Jr.

Source: Scott Shane. Feb. 18, 2018. "Hoe Unwitting Americans Encountered Russian Operatives Online," *The New York Times.*

Soon thereafter, Trump admitted that Russia had accomplished its goal of creating "discord, disruption and chaos" in the United States.

Source: Kyle Feldscher. Feb. 18, 2018. "Trump: Russian succeeded 'beyond their wildest dreams' at sowing discord in America," *The Washington Examiner.*

"We expect Russia to continue using propaganda, social media, false-flag personas, sympathetic spokespeople and other means of influence to try to exacerbate social and political fissures in the United States."
        - Dan Coats, director of national intelligence.

Source: Matthew Rosenberg, Charlie Savage, & Michael Wines. Feb. 13, 2018. "Russia Sees Midterm Election as Chance to Sow Fresh Discord, Intelligence Chief Warns," *The New York Times.*

A weekend gun control rally in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. One hour after news of the school shooting in nearby Parkland spread, Twitter accounts (linked to Russia) shifted their focus to the gun control debate.

Credit: Saul Martinez for *The New York Times*

Source: Matthew Rosenberg, Charlie Savage, & Michael Wines. Feb. 13, 2018. "Russia Sees Midterm Election as Chance to Sow Fresh Discord, Intelligence Chief Warns," *The New York Times.*

Any news event — no matter how tragic — has become fodder to spread inflammatory messages in what is believed to be a far-reaching Russian disinformation campaign.

Source: Matthew Rosenberg, Charlie Savage, & Michael Wines. Feb. 13, 2018. "Russia Sees Midterm Election as Chance to Sow Fresh Discord, Intelligence Chief Warns," *The New York Times.*

Research in this area:

Last year, the Alliance for Securing Democracy, in conjunction with the German Marshall Fund, a public policy research group in Washington, created a website that tracks hundreds of Twitter accounts of human users and suspected bots that they have linked to a Russian influence campaign.

Source: Matthew Rosenberg, Charlie Savage, & Michael Wines. Feb. 13, 2018. "Russia Sees Midterm Election as Chance to Sow Fresh Discord, Intelligence Chief Warns," *The New York Times.*

Research in this area:

Sanovich, S. (2017). "Computational Propaganda in Russia: The Origins of Digital Disinformation" Samuel Woolley and Philip N. Howard, Eds. Working Paper 2017.3. Oxford, UK: Project on Computational Propaganda.

Russian political Twitter, and are easily identifiable at first glance: they produce a vast number of similar tweets (for example, post only retweets, or only pictures, or only news headlines) but lack many of the common attributes of human users, such as a name, bio, profile picture, location and replies to and from other users, and often have no followers.

Research in this area:

Hegelich, S. & Janetzko, D. (2016). Are social bots on Twitter political actors? Empirical evidence from a Ukranian social botnet. Proceedings from 10th Annual AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media.

Abstract: A considerable amount of data on social networks like Twitter is not generated by humans but by automatic programs (bots). Some of these bots are mimicking humans and can hardly be identified. Based on text mining and unsupervised learning, we can identify different behaviors, including mimicry and promotion (via hashtags and retweets).

Research in this area:

Santana, A. D. & Camaj, L. (2015). Facebook as a campaign tool: A new dimension to agenda setting discourse. *The Journal of Social Media in Society 4*(2): 106-137.
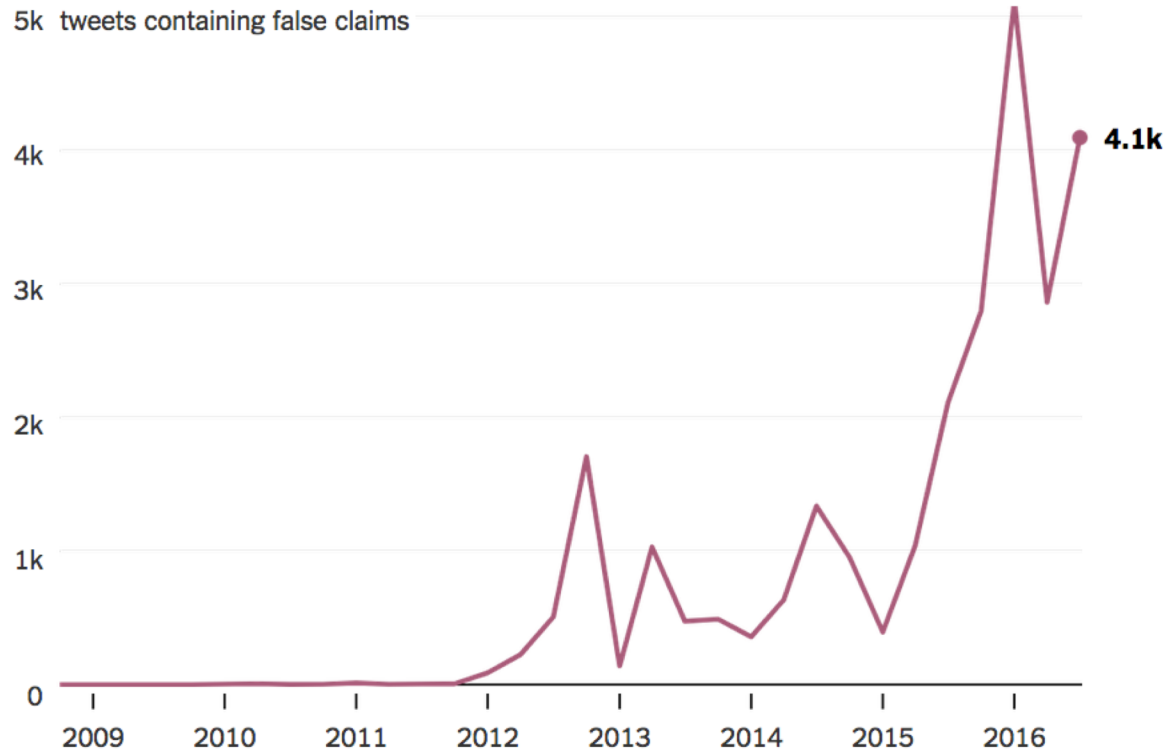
Abstract: Facebook has risen to become an important campaign tool for politicians while also raising new questions about how its use is reshaping the agenda setting paradigm. Findings demonstrate that in their political campaigns on Facebook, politicians are successfully transferring their first- and second-level agendas to the Facebook public agenda, which largely mirrors the greater public agenda.

Research in this area:

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science, 359*(6380): 1146-1151.

Abstract: About 126,000 rumors were spread by ~3 million people. False news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people. Falsehood also diffused faster than the truth. The degree of novelty and the emotional reactions of recipients may be responsible for the differences observed.

The number of tweets containing false claims and stories related to politics spiked during the past two presidential elections.

5k tweets containing false claims

4k   ● **4.1k**

3k

2k

1k

0
   2009   2010   2011   2012   2013   2014   2015   2016

What can be done?

Understanding how false information spreads is a first step toward curbing it. Human behavior plays a large role in explaining the phenomenon.

"Polarization has turned out to be a great business model." - Deb Roy, author of the M.I.T. study and former chief media scientist at Twitter.

My research on online commenting forums:

Hopp, T., Santana, A. & Barker V. (2018). Who Finds Value in News Comment Communities? An Analysis of the Influence of Individual User, Perceived News Site Quality, and Site Type Factors. *Telematics and Informatics.*

Santana, A. D. (2016). Controlling the conversation: The availability of commenting forums in online newspapers. *Journalism Studies 17*(2): 141-158.

Santana, A. D. (2015). Incivility dominates online comments on immigration. *Newspaper Research Journal, 36(1): 92-107.*

Santana, A. D. (2014). Virtuous or vitriolic: The effect of anonymity on civility in newspaper reader comment boards. *Journalism Practice, 8*(1): 18-33.

Santana. A. D. (2011). Online readers' comments represent new opinion pipeline. *Newspaper Research Journal, 32*(3): 66-81.

Future research:

What don't we know: the extent to which these same people have infiltrated *commenting forums* of news sites with the same goal: to sow discord.